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ABSTRACT

A 20 item television commercial attitude survey given to 232 6th, 8th, and 12th grade students tested the hypotheses that: 1) younger children are more influenced by commercials than are older children; 2) that children are more apt to buy products which exert peer pressure upon them; and 3) that children are more susceptible to commercials which rely upon cute ideas than on endorsement by famous personalities. The subjects responded to the 20 statements according to the Likert Scale, indicating a range of attitudes from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". Item analysis, means, standard deviations, standard errors, and t-values were computed for the different groups of students, according to sex and grade level. The results of the survey supported the second and third hypotheses, but not the first. The data did indicate, however, the children of different ages respond in varying ways to different commercials, and that the differences in attitudes were greater when the age differential was larger. (PB)

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ATTITUDES OF STUDENTS IN GRADES SIX, EIGHT, AND TWELVE TOWARD TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

This research is a survey of attitudes of school children toward television commercials. A total of 232 students were surveyed in three neighboring school districts in Northern Illinois. Twenty questions cover the range of the opinions of sixth, eighth, and twelfth graders.

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How seriously are young people affected by television commercials? Do they accept all or most of the dozens of commercials that bombard their senses every time they switch the television on? Or do they reject most or all commercials as simply propaganda? If so, do they "hear" but not listen to the commercial, or do they simply "tune out" until after the commercial is over like many adults seem to do. Do they selectively listen to TV commercials that advertise a product that they have a genuine interest in? To what extent does hero worship play in advertising? These and other questions that arose during the study are analyzed and discussed in the following paper.

Young children are probably affected by TV commercials more than older children who have learned to differentiate between fantasy and fact. It is also probable that children are more apt to buy a product or ask their parents to buy a product that exerts a certain amount of peer pressure or social acceptance on them. They are probably less affected by hero endorsement than by cute or mind sticking commercials.

To test the above hypotheses was a set of twenty-five statements ranging in content from hero endorsement of commercial products to scientific validity of TV commercials. From this initial set of statements, twenty were selected, reorganized, and reworded. A complete list of the questionnaire can be found in Table 1.

The statements were designed in order that pupils in sixth grade could read and understand the statements. Even then the administrator had to explain some words to the below reading level students. The

statements were also designed to allow for differences in degree. For instance, statement 3 says that famous personalities should be allowed to make commercials only if the personality is not a part of the program being shown, and statement 5 states that famous personalities should not be allowed to make commercials at all. In all, at least four statements pertained to famous personalities making commercials. No attempt was made to name specific personalities or specific commercials. It was assumed that boys and girls would internalize the term "famous personality" to mean a hero of their own age group or sex. In some instances in which a sixth grader did not understand the term "famous personality", the name of a famous football or baseball player was supplied to a boy asking the question. Likewise, a girl's favorite idol (which could be a male rock singer) was supplied to a girl asking the same question. This information, of course, did not affect the validity of the statement. Most of the statements could be categorized into one of the following areas: those statements concerned with famous personalities, those related to how much attention the subjects paid to TV commercials, and those that pertained to social acceptance (ie. popularity, good looks, etc.). Responses were made according to the Likert Scale. Since the IBM answer sheets had lettered answer boxes, a scale of A-E was substituted for the normal 1-5 scale. The following code was practiced:

A (1) = strongly agree
B (2) = agree
C (3) = neutral (no feelings)
D (4) = disagree
E (5) = strongly disagree

These letters were later converted back to numbers during computer analysis. Thus all statistics mentioned in the following pages are based on numbers. It should be noted that twenty-three statements in all comprised

the questionnaire, the first three of which were concerned with sex, grade, and TV or no TV in the home respectively. A total of 232 students in grades six, eight, and twelve were surveyed. This can be broken down to include 125 boys and 107 girls. This figure can also be broken down by grade, consisting of 126 sixth graders, 63 eighth graders and 43 twelfth grade students. The sample was taken from three neighboring school districts in Northern Illinois on November 22, 1972. Sixth grade students at Thompson Elementary School and eighth grade students at Lincoln Middle School in Rockford were surveyed as well as sixth grade students at Washington Elementary School in Belvidere and seniors at Harlem High School in the Rockford suburb of Loves Park. All three areas are of comparable socio-economic levels. It is interesting to note that of all the students surveyed, only one indicated that there was no television in the home.

Table 1

Television Commercial Attitude Survey

The numbered boxes on your answer sheet represent the strength of your feelings to a statement. If you strongly agree with the statement, fill in the box under letter A; if you agree but not strongly, fill in the box under letter B. If you are neutral to the statement, that is, if you have no feelings either way, fill in the box under letter C. If you disagree, fill in the box under letter D, and if you strongly disagree, fill in box letter E. Put your answers on the IBM answer sheet.

If you are a male, fill in box A; if you are a female, fill in box B.

If you are in sixth grade, fill in box A; if you are in eighth grade, fill in box B; if you are in twelfth grade, fill in box C.

If you have a TV in your home, fill in box A; if not, fill in box B.

1. Television commercials use cartoon characters too much.

2. Television commercials use famous personalities too much.

3. Famous personalities should be allowed to make commercials only if the personality is not a part of the program (ie. football players should not advertise a product during a football game in which they are playing).

4. Famous personalities should not recommend a particular brand or product.

5. Famous personalities should not make TV commercials at all.

6. Most companies spend too much money on producing commercials to impress us.

7. Most TV commercials are cute or interesting.

8. Most TV commercials are cute or interesting, but they still do not cause me to buy that brand.

9. Most TV commercials try to make us believe that by using that product we will have more friends and be more popular.

10. Many TV commercials try to make us believe that by using that product we will be more attractive to the other sex.

11. Most TV commercials which compare two brands are slanted in favor of the one being advertised.

12. Most TV commercials tell only the good points of the product and do not point out the bad points or shortcomings.

13. Most TV commercials aimed at kids (toys, cereals, etc.), make it seem like you will be better or stronger than other kids who do not buy it.

14. Kids' commercials often cause arguments between you and your parents or your brothers or sisters and your parents.

15. Most TV commercials have little affect on the products I buy.

16. I usually buy the product that my favorite personalities (ie. athletes, singers, etc.) advertise.

17. I usually do not pay much attention to TV commercials.

18. I usually watch commercials because they are interesting, even though I may not buy the product.

19. I usually leave the room when a commercial comes on.

20. Most TV commercials in which demonstrations are done, do not follow the scientific procedure of experimentation, observation, and conclusion.

Of the twenty attitude statements that were administered, about half were favorable statements and half were negatively stated. This is in keeping with the Likert method of preventing the questionnaire from being slanted.

An item analysis for each statement (variable) was made. The mean, standard deviation, standard error, t-value, and level of significance were computed for the different groups. The sample populations were compared according to sex and grade in school. Since the mean and level of significance give us a better statistical picture, the present research will center around them.

Based on the t-test, a level of significant value of .05 was considered substantial enough to reject the null hypothesis. In other words, a 95% probability of an observable and predictable difference from the mean was considered significant. To be sure that differences would be observed, some statements were directed at specific age groups or a specific sex in order to discriminate.

Variable 18 was the most significant (0.008 level) statement in the boys versus girls comparison. Girls were in stronger agreement that they watch commercials because they are cute or interesting even though they may not buy the product. However, both groups tended to be neutral, that is, to have no opinion (girls mean = 2.4953, boys mean = 2.9600). As expected, most mean values tended to cluster around the 3.000 or median mark for all variables. It is interesting that there was no significant difference

in the attitudes toward variable 18 when viewed from the different age levels. Apparently, all boys in the three grade levels were in strong agreement as were all girls in the three grade levels. Yet boys agreed more with the statement that most TV commercials are cute or interesting (variable 7). This seems to be contradictory to the measured attitude toward variable 18. Since variable 18 is a compound statement with two elements, possible explanations for the paradox can only be speculated. However, one plausible explanation is that even though boys agree more strongly that commercials are cute or interesting, girls are less apt to buy the product. If that is the case, girls as a class probably represent a wiser consumer since they are less swayed by advertising. However, a comparison of sixth graders to high school seniors reveals that sixth graders find commercials cuter and more interesting (0.049 level of significance).

As one can see from Table 2, the girls seem to agree more strongly that TV commercials tell only the good points and neglect the shortcomings of a product. However, both sexes agree rather strongly with the statement (girls' mean equals 1.5327; boys' mean equals 1.8880). This is in complete compliance with the foregone conclusion that girls are probably wiser consumers. Again there was little difference in agreement toward variable 12 when age levels were considered. An interesting, although not significant fact, is that girls and boys were in almost complete agreement with respect to variable number 1. The level of significance was an astonishing 0.996.

Variable 10 presents an interesting situation when one compares the attitudes of sixth graders and older adolescents toward beauty aids. The mean rating of sixth graders was 2.8492 as compared to a 2.2381 mean rating

by eighth graders. This is significant at the 0.003 level. High school seniors agreed with the statement to a greater degree than sixth graders but less than eighth graders (mean = 2.2683). This is reflected in a 0.005 level of significance for sixth versus twelfth grades. Thus of the three age groups, eighth graders agree most strongly that many commercials try to make us believe that by using that product, we will be more attracted to the opposite sex. One may well infer from these statistics that twelve and thirteen year olds are more concerned with or "hung up" on sexual attraction. Certainly, at least, they exhibit a greater awareness to such commercials. It probably is safe to say that sixth graders are not yet that interested in products which enhance one's sexual attraction. Furthermore, most sixth graders are physiologically less in need of beauty aids than eighth graders who are in the puberty stage. Seniors are perhaps more subtle about beauty aids owing to a more realistic outlook toward sexual attraction. On the other hand, eighth graders may simply be agreeing that those commercials try to make us believe a certain way, but they don't necessarily succeed.

Closely allied to the concept of sexual attraction in television commercials is the emphasis that many TV commercials place on making and keeping friends. Here we find that high school seniors agree strongest with variable 9. (See Table 3) Whether this means that seniors are more popularity conscious than the other students or that TV commercials are trying to "sell" them on the importance of the advertised product or the importance of friends is again uncertain. Perhaps twelfth graders can "see through" the commercials better than the other age groups can.

Students of all three grade levels agree strongly with variable 11 that most commercials which compare two brands are slanted in favor of the

one being advertised. Yet twelfth graders agree so strongly (mean = 1.6341) that when compared to sixth graders, the level of significance is 0.001. Sixth and eighth graders agreed exactly (mean equals 2.1746). Thus by simple mathematical substitution we could predict a high level of significance between eighth and twelfth graders. Variable 12, which is similar to variable 11 (except that only one product is being considered) indicates that all levels of students agreed very strongly with the statement.

Results of variable 15 indicate that eighth graders are less apt to buy a certain product seen in TV commercials than either sixth or twelfth graders. However, there was little difference between the response given by sixth graders. There was significant difference between the response of eighth and twelfth graders, however. (0.01 level). Perhaps this can be better understood if one considers the fact that most eighth (and sixth) graders probably have less money to spend for advertised or non-advertised products.

If those high school seniors surveyed are typical of most older teens, then most seventeen and eighteen year olds pay little attention to TV commercials. The mean for this group was 2.3415. There was no significant difference in the response given by girls and boys.

Table 2

A Comparison Table Showing Significant Variables

Variable	Boys vs Girls	6th vs 8th	6th vs 12th	8th vs 12th
7	highly significant	___	highly significant	fairly significant
9	___	___	highly significant	___
10	___	highly significant	highly significant	___
11	___	highly significant	very highly significant	highly significant
12	highly significant	___	___	___
15	___	___	___	highly significant
17	___	___	___	highly significant
18	highly significant	___	___	___

Table 3

Quantitative Table of Significant Values

Variable	Boys vs Girls	6th vs 8th	6th vs 12th	8th vs 12th
7	2.9520 2.6168 0.062	———	2.6984 3.1951 0.049	2.7302 3.1951 0.094
9	———	———	2.8413 2.3415 0.030	———
10	———	2.8492 2.2381 0.003	2.8492 2.2683 0.005	———
11	———	———	2.1746 1.6341 0.001	2.1746 1.6341 0.006
12	1.8800 1.5327 0.014	———	———	———
15	———	———	———	2.2222 2.7317 0.019
17	———	———	———	2.9048 2.3415 0.020
18	2.9600 2.4953 0.008	———	———	———

Note: The top figures in each line represent the mean for each group. The lower figure represents the level of significance.

According to Goodson, commercials have developed into the sprightliest little plays on TV. Often a viewer is tempted to fix a sandwich and pour a beer during the program in order to see the commercial. Surely everyone at one time or another has wanted to leave the room during a commercial break but remained to watch a favorite commercial. Consider, for example, the Alka-Seltzer commercials which have become the standard by which all others are judged. Not only is the commercial cute and popular, it has produced such famous phrases as "I ate the W-h-o-l-e thing" and "try it, you'll like it".[1]

In several of the Gillette commercials, famous athletes are used to advertise razor blades. For example, in one commercial Tom Seaver moves the product closer to the face when the announcer says "closer shave". Subsequently, the announcer replies "Get the football player".[2] Goodson's point is that people enjoy commercials that employ famous people with whom we can in one way or another identify. According to the present study neither boys nor girls nor students in sixth, eighth, or twelfth grades object to having famous personalities advertise on television. However, neither boys nor girls in this survey indicated that they often buy a product that their favorite personalities advertise. Therefore, even though they may watch the commercial and have no objections to famous people making commercials, these students are not really spurred to action. Based on these observations one questions the value of advertising--at least advertising by famous people.

According to Vogue Magazine, we are overly concerned with surface

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[1]Mark Goodson, "Reviewing the Commercials", Time, 96:59, November 9, 1970

[2]Ibid.

appearance. Consider all the time spent on advertising hair sprays, perfume, hair tonic, hair rinses, shampoos, bath soaps, facial soaps, scented soaps, unscented soaps, deodorant soaps, etc. There is great emphasis placed on sexual attractiveness. Several advertising companies have luscious girls who catch the attention of at least the male viewing audience. Noxema shave lotion commercials have a beautiful blonde Swede who says "Take it all off" over a bare shoulder. Silva Thins use several beautiful women in their commercials. Many commercials contain the hidden idea that the attraction is not of one person for another but of one person for the product. Such are the Aqua Velva commercials which say "There's something about an Aqua Velva man" and the Wind Song commercial which says "Your Wind Song stays on my mind".

Detergents, antiperspirants, and toothpaste commercials like to use important scientific sounding terms such as GL-70. We can buy Ambush and make a game of sex; or we can chew Dentyne Gum and be kissed by the dreamiest guy (or girl) in town. If that doesn't work, use Lavoris with "pucker power".[3]

One of the most significant generalizations that can be made as a result of this survey is that different age groups of children are affected in different ways by television commercials. Or to put it into better perspective, various age groups respond to different kinds of commercials. The way in which eighth graders respond to commercials pertaining to physical attraction bears out this fact. Apparently there is a direct relationship between age difference and attitudes toward a

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[3]S. Harrington, "Enticers, 1970 on TV, Who do They Think You Are", Vogue, 155:118, January 15, 1970

certain type of commercial. That is to say that the greater the difference between two age groups, the greater the difference in their attitudes. A quick glance at table three reveals that there was only one variable which was significant when comparing sixth graders to eighth graders. However, there were several variables with a high level of significance when sixth graders were compared to high school seniors and eighth graders were compared to seniors. Thus in summary, although the original hypothesis that stated that older children view TV commercials more realistically is not substantiated in all cases, there certainly is a different attitude prevalent between young children and older teenagers.

REFERENCES

Goodson, M. 1970. "Reviewing the Commercials". Time. 96:59

Harrington, S. 1970. "Enticers, 1970 on TV, Who do They Think You Are". Vogue. 155:118